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ABSTRACT

It has been found that the sexes differ as to social/affective versus instrumental/competence orientation, with females oriented more towards the social domain and males oriented more towards the instrumental domain. Because it has been suggested that the sexes also differ as to the source of self-esteem, with males deriving esteem from task accomplishment (efficacious behaviors) and females deriving esteem from social relationships (worthy behaviors), it was hypothesized that the sexes would also vary as to the meaning of self-esteem. Subjects were 40 male and 50 female adult college students who completed measures of self-esteem. It was found that global self-esteem correlated with a measure generally considered to be representative of self-worth for females, but not for males. Similarly, global self-esteem correlated with a measure considered representative of self-efficacy for males, but not for females. No sex difference was found in the level of self-esteem held by the sexes. It was concluded that the meaning of self-esteem may be more accurately defined in terms of efficacy for males, and worth for females. (NB)

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Gender Differences in the Meaning of Self-Esteem

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Abstract

It has been found that the sexes differ as to social/affective versus instrumental/competence orientation, with females oriented more towards the social domain, and males more oriented towards the instrumental domain. Because it has been suggested that the sexes also differ as to the source of self-esteem, with males deriving esteem from task accomplishment (efficacious behaviors) and females deriving esteem from social relationships (worthy behaviors), it was hypothesized that the sexes would also vary as to the meaning of self-esteem. Adult college students (40 males and 50 females) served as subjects. It was found that global self-esteem correlated with a measure generally considered to be representative of self-worth for females, but not for males. Similarly, global self-esteem correlated with a measure considered representative of self-efficacy for males, but not for females. No sex difference existed in the level of self-esteem held by the sexes. It was concluded that the meaning of self esteem may be more accurately defined in terms of efficacy for males, and worth for females. Implications for the measurement of self-esteem were discussed.

Gender Differences in the Meaning of Self-Esteem

Gender differences in the sources of self-esteem have been found to exist, and such differences appear to parallel gender differences in self-definition (Wylie, 1979; Williams, 1977). Specifically, it has been suggested that males derive self-esteem from instrumental accomplishments and females from relationships with others (Mitchell, 1983). Because of womens' reliance on self-esteem from others, rather than from personal achievement, Bardwick (1971) suggested that females would hold lower, and less stable, self-esteem than males. Her speculation led to much research concerning possible gender differences in levels of global self-esteem, but such differences have not been found (Loeb & Horst, 1978; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Rosenberg, 1979). However, this research has been conducted primarily with children and adolescents as subjects. If both the sources of self-esteem and self-definitions differ according to sex, is it possible that the meaning of self-esteem varies according to gender? The purpose of this study was to investigate such a possibility, and to compare levels of global self-esteem in adults.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem has been considered an important variable in determing behavior, adjustment, and happiness, with low esteem equating with behavioral problems, maladjustment, and unhappiness (Burns, 1979; Harter, 1983). Low self-esteem also correlates with depression and lack of satisfaction

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with life (Crandall, 1973; Rosenberg, 1979).

It has been suggested that self-esteem is a prime motive in directing human behavior (Burns, 1979; Rosenberg, 1979). Both the attempt to acquire an adequate level of self-esteem and the need to continually maintain a given level of esteem have been suggested as major determinants of behavior (Campbell, 1984). Becker, a cultural anthropologist, suggested that "The principle which explains the law of human character development is the Principle of Self-Esteem Maintenance. . . . The various styles of human character (or life styles) which result from this early training can then be considered as variations in modes of self-esteem maintenance" (1968, p. 238).

But one problem in self-esteem research is the lack of a clearly defined construct (Harter, 1983; Wells & Marwell, 1976). Two separate definitions of global self-esteem have emerged. Some authors equate esteem with self-efficacy, as the degree to which an individual assesses his or her own instrumental abilities and potentials in relation to desired goals (e.g., James, 1890). This has been termed self-efficacy, or self-evaluation (Bandura, 1977; Diggory, 1966). The other definition of self-esteem has been that of self-worth, as a perception of one's value and worth to others based on moral qualities (Robbins, Kaplan, & Martin, 1985). Still others suggested that global self-esteem involves the addition of both worth and efficacy, as dimensions of self-esteem (Franks & Marolla, 1976; Gecas &

Schwalbe, 1986).

Definitional differences led to similar differences in the measurement of self-esteem. Such differences in measurement led to confusing and othen contradictory results (Wells & Marwell, 1976). As Stake and Orlofsky (1981) noted, self-esteem measures have been shown to be unpredictive of behavior, particularly for females. These authors found that instrumental measures accounted for more variance in self-esteem scores of males than females, and they concluded that multidimensional measures of self-esteem might be more appropriate.

Gender Differences in Global Self-Esteem

Despite the variance in measures of self-esteem, few gender differences have been found (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). However, (a) children and adolescents, rather than adults, have generally served as subjects and (b) most research conducted has involved global, as opposed to multidimensional, measurements. When multidimensional measures of self-esteem have been used, some gender differences in the dimensions of self-esteem have been noted. For example, female adolescents score higher than males in terms of a moral (self-worth) dimension (Offer, Ostrov, & Howard, 1977).

Common to all discussions of self-esteem is the assumption of salience (Harter, 1983; James, 1890; Rosenberg, 1979). Specifically this refers to the concept that any event or thought can affect self-esteem only if the

construct is relevant to an individual's self-concept. Unfortunately, most research has not involved ratings of the relevance of any question to one's self-concept. Wylie (1974) concluded that it remains to be shown whether ratings of salience make a difference in global esteem scores. Yet if the sexes vary as to which definition (or dimension) of self-esteem is relevant to self-concept, the question of salience in relation to measurement is vital, and comparisons of global self-esteem between the sexes may be impossible without such knowledge concerning salience.

Gender differences in the salience of various sources of self-esteem are well-documented in terms of adolescents (Bardwick, 1971; Williams, 1977). It has been found that males are more oriented towards, and derive more esteem from, instrumental accomplishments, and females are more oriented towards, and derive more esteem from, affiliation

Gender Differences in the Sources of Self-Esteem

There exists a common assumption in society, and among researchers, that females are more oriented towards relationships and males are more oriented towards instrumental activities. Gilligan (1982), among others, suggested that this orientation involves self-definition, and derives from the fact that females are cared for by females, and thus retain an identity with others. But males, on the other hand, must identify with the sex that does not give primary caregiving, and thus males come to see themselves as separate from others.

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Evidence exists that both sexes come to define themselves in stereotypic terms, and that a sense of self for females inolves a feeling of connectedness to others, whereas a sense of self for males involves a feeling of separateness (Wylie, 1979). Burns (1979) concurred, and pointed out that although the traditional dichotomy of instrumental versus affiliative characteristics appears old-fashioned, contemporary investigations including his own confirm this fact.

Most researchers use the terms "instrumentality" or "agency" to describe the tendency of males to orient themselves towards accomplishment, and "communion," "expressiveness", or "affiliation" as a motivation describing the female tendency to be more interested in social relationships (e.g., Bakan, 1966, Carlson, 1971; Terman & Tyler, 1955). Males have been found to derive self-esteem from achievement and positions of power and females from relationships and moral qualities (Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Wilson & Wilson, 1976). Burns (1979) suggested that this difference occurs at puberty, but that prior to that time, both sexes gain self-esteem from age-appropriate accomplishments.

Although the sources of self-esteem are thought to be different for the sexes, is it also possible that the meaning of esteem is different? Stake and Orlofsky (1981) found that agency (instrumentality) accounted for more variance in the self-esteem of traditional than

nontraditional males. It is therefore possible that socialization practices influence the development of the sources of self-esteem. However, the actual meaning of self-esteem to the individual, and how that might vary by sex, has not been investigated.

The present study was conducted to investigate possible gender differences in the meaning to self-esteem. It was hypothesized that (a) the correlation between self-rated self-esteem and a measure of self-worth would be higher for females than for males, and (b) the correlation between self-rated self-esteem and a measure of self-efficacy would be higher for males than for females. It was further hypothesized that no gender differences in level of self-esteem as measured by global self-rated self-esteem, self-efficacy, or self-worth, would exist.

Method

Subjects

Because the purpose of this study was to examine efficacy and worth as associated with self-esteem in adults, and to test possible gender differences in global self-esteem, adult students attending the University of West Florida were chosen as subjects because the average age of students at that upper-level college was 27 years. Respondents (50 females and 40 males) were recruited from undergraduate and graduate classes. Subjects served as volunteers, and their ages ranged from 18 to 58. Of these, 26 females and 24 males were currently employed as well as

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being students.

Materials

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), a global self-rated self-esteem question, and a global self-rated self-efficacy question, served as self-esteem measures. Subjects were asked to respond first to the Rosenberg scale in terms of how they normally felt, and then to respond in terms of how they felt with in the following contexts: with family, with friends, in school, and, if applicable, at work. Demographic information was also collected.

The Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale was chosen as a measure of general self-worth which would reflect perceptions of affiliation and acceptance from others. This instrument was chosen for several reasons. It is brief (10 questions), commonly used, and well-regarded (Miller, Rollins, & Thomas, 1984). It has been used with both adolescents and adults. A two-week test-retest reliability of .85 was estimated by Silber and Tippett (1965) using both sexes as subjects.

A global measure of self-efficacy, based on Diggory's (1966) global question and on James' theory of self-esteem was administered. This question involved rating the percentage of time an individual perceives the self as accomplishing goals set for the self.

A self-rated self-esteem question in which subjects were asked to rate their own level of self-esteem was

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administered so that comparisons between self-efficacy and self-worth as global self-esteem could be conducted. In a subsequent pilot study, reliability was estimated. The Pearson product moment correlation was found to be .93.

Procedures

Subjects were recruited in classrooms at the university and asked to stay after class if they wished to participate in a study of self-perceptions. Some students were given extra credit in their classes for participation. They were informed that they could leave the testing at any time, and were not to place their names on the questionnaires. Subjects were also informed that they could ask questions at any time during or after filling out the questionnaires.

Results and Discussion

This study was designed to investigate (a) gender differences in the meaning of self-esteem and (b) gender differences in the levels of self-esteem, self-worth, and self-efficacy. As expected, it was found that gender differences in the meaning of self-esteem, with males apparently equating self-esteem more with self-efficacy, and females apparently equating self-esteem more with self-worth (see Table 1). Specifically, a signficant correlation between global self-esteem and self-efficacy (Pearson product moment coefficient=.45) but a significant correlation between global self-esteem and self-efficacy did not exist for females. A *t*-test using Fisher's R to Z transformation to compare correlations between groups was

conducted and was significant (t=2.05, P <.05) Further, a significant correlation between global self-esteem and self-worth existed for females (r=.42) but no significant correlation between self-worth and self-esteem existed for males. A t-test using Fisher's R to Z transformation to compare groups was conducted, but was not significant at the .05 level (t=1.2). It should be noted that this t-test is a conservative test of significant differences between groups which depends upon sample size, and thus it is possible, if a larger sample were obtained, that a level of significance might be reached.

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insert Table 1 about here

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The results of this study concerning the meaning of self-esteem are in line with the theoretical assumption postulated by Bardwick (1971) and others that self-esteem for females depends upon self-worth (as a dimension related to relationships with others and acceptance by others) and that self-esteem for males depends upon self-efficacy (as a dimension of instrumental behavior). The results are also consistant with Stake and Orlofsky's (1981) finding that efficacy (instrumentality) accounts for more variation in the self-esteem of males than females.

As expected, no significant differences were found between males and females in terms of levels of self-esteem, self-worth, and self-efficacy (see Table 2). To analyze

results, Student *t*-tests were performed. None of these tests were significant at the .05 level. This result is in line with previous results indicating that the sexes do not vary in terms of levels of self-esteem (e.g., Maccoby & Jacklin, 1975). The importance of this result is that adults, rather than children and adolescents, served as subjects.

Conclusions

It may be that self-esteem for males depends more on self-efficacy than self-worth, whereas self-esteem for females depends more on self-worth than self-efficacy Therefore, as Stake and Orlofsky (1981) and others have suggested, multiple measures of self-esteem may be required. More specifically, however, measures of self-esteem which are non-specific in referent may be more useful, particularly when comparing groups.

Global self-esteem, whatever the source or meaning does not appear to be greater for males than for females. Rosenberg (1979) suggested that lack of difference in self-esteem level between groups (whether divided by race or gender) is due to the fact that the individual compares their own worth to those within their group, even if that group is demeaned, rather than to individuals in general. To the extent that social comparison processes are related to self-esteem it would appear that group membership, rather than societal values concerning that group, helps determine not only the level of self-esteem (in comparison with others

of a similar group) but perhaps the meaning of (and influences on) self-esteem. Males are expected in our society to accomplish instrumental activities, and females are expected to be involved in caregiving and subsequently in their relationships with others. These expectations are influencial in the development of self-concept and self-esteem.

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Table 1

Correlations Between Self-Esteem and Efficacy and Worth

	Sex	
Type of Test	Female[a]	Male[b]
Global Esteem & Efficacy	.01	.45**
Global Esteem & Worth	.42**	.19
Worth & Efficacy	.01	.36*

[a] n=50

[b] n=40

*p>.05

**p>.01

of the 19th century might we still find in family stories and how are they perceived as having influenced a family? Developmental research can take a historical view when focusing on events experienced and transmitted by past cohorts.

Several authors have argued that the remembered past is a good source of data for research on the life cycle (Lieberman and Falk, 1971; Runyan, 1982). Researchers who study lives have pointed to the great theoretical and practical value of the biographical method, "We are safe in saying that personal life-records, as complete as possible, constitute the perfect type of sociological material" (Thomas and Znanieki, 1927, p. 1833). In a related area, the study of personality "is most perfectly represented in the study of lives in their individuality" (White, 1972, p. 2). Finally, "the life history is, after all, the basic criterion against which all other materials should be tested" (Allport, 1961, p. 410).

Family stories further relate to research on reminiscence and life review (Bertaux, 1981; Runyan, 1982). When looking at the biography of individuals, it readily becomes obvious that a personal life history cannot contain a complete description of an individual (Dray, 1962, White, 1965). It was the purpose of this study to find out which parts of life histories remain "family treasures" over which period of time to create current family reality. Family stories could give answers to perspectives relating to individual, family, and historical time. The remembered past will indicate how to place families into the historical context.

A final interest in family stories relates to family themes. Askham (1982) pointed out that the reviewed stories of a single week

Table 2

Self-Esteem Means

	Sex of Subject			
Scale	Females*	(Dev.)	Males**	(Dev)
Global self-esteem	3.20	(.47)	3.35	(.55)
Self-worth	3.34	(.40)	3.37	(.30)
Self-efficacy	74.45	(13)	72.36	(22)

*n=50 **n=40